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ABSTRACT

Teachers of all subjects at all levels are constantly searching for helpful new materials, and many corporations and special interest organizations have responded by preparing and distributing free or low-cost materials for "educational" purposes. However, a teacher should preview such materials carefully before using them to determine whether they might be propaganda for the corporation or organization. For example, a pamphlet produced by the American Advertising Federation, entitled "Questions and Answers about Advertising," purports to answer 20 frequently asked questions about advertising. The booklet contains many misleading statements and much incomplete information, and is a veritable handbook of logical fallacies. While such educational materials may be a true bargain if used advisedly, if accepted without question they are far too "expensive" to use. (DF)

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FREE EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS: TOO MUCH TO PAY?

Teachers of all subjects at all levels are constantly on the lookout for helpful new materials, and many corporations and special-interest organizations have responded to their search by establishing bureaus which prepare and distribute free and low-cost materials which they label "educational." There are, no doubt, many good materials that come from such sources, but a teacher who is tempted to use materials prepared by a special-interest group should preview them carefully to see whether they are more than propaganda for the corporation or organization.

As an example, we might look at a pamphlet entitled Questions and Answers About Advertising published by the American Advertising Federation. The pamphlet is intended for a general audience (since "almost everybody, at one time or another, has a question about some phase of [advertising]") and might seem suitable for English class discussions of the language of advertising or for marketing class introductions to the purposes of advertising. The pamphlet purports to answer twenty frequently-asked questions about advertising in "plain, non-technical terms." It does achieve freedom from technicality, but the "plainness" is in doubt even in

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the answers to such straightforward questions as the first, "How much is spent for advertising in the United States?" After citing a specific figure ($28.6 billion in 1974) and the percentage of the gross national product it represents (2%), the pamphlet points out--gratuitously and rather ominously--that about fifty firms (out of a total of more than 4,000,000) consistently spend at least $10 million per year on advertising. These firms are identified as offering "the quality and variety of goods and services which consumers demand and expect." But unanswered are the questions that such information raises. Isn't there a suggestion that wealth and power are so concentrated in the hands of so few that the concept of competition within the "free enterprise" system is impracticable? And does American business truly offer choices to the consumer? The matter of wealth and competition can be exemplified by the cereal industry. Although the AAF pamphlet cites only a vague top expenditure on advertising by an individual company of $10 million or more, as early as 1966 Kellogg spent $46 million on advertising, with a net profit of $38.3 million for its 40% share of the breakfast food market (as cited by Ron Goulart in The Assault on Childhood, Sherbourne Press, 1969). If anyone argues that there is still room for competition with a necessary product like breakfast food, he may be surprised to learn that in the same year Nabisco captured only 5% of the market, Ralston Purina 3%, and fifty other companies combined 2% (also in Goulart). As for the "variety" that the consumer wants, it is not difficult to establish that a great deal of advertising money is spent

on trying to differentiate products so similar that it is impossible for ordinary consumers to tell them apart. Studies by various agencies (e.g., Consumers Union and the FDA) show that aspirin is aspirin is aspirin despite wide variation in price. (I recently noted 100 Bayer selling for $1.09, 100 St. Joseph for 98¢, and 100 of an unadvertised brand for 49¢.) This matter of the illusion of choice is the subject of a recent book by Jeffrey Schrank, Snap, Crackle, and Popular Taste (Dell, 1977). Schrank convincingly argues that the bulk of advertising money is spent in trying to convince consumers that one product is better than another which is basically the same, and he cites the widespread practice of creating competition between products that are not just similar but identical--e.g., bananas from the same plantation and gasolines from the same refinery. He also points out (as do other writers, like Carl P. Wrighter in I Can Sell You Anything) that the term "best" is legally interpreted, in advertising, as a parity word which can be translated as "no better or worse than the competition."

The second question which the AAF pamphlet poses is "Why do we need to spend this amount?" The answer first focuses on the necessity of continuing production and consumption for continuing economic growth. If the answer were to go no further, it might be difficult to refute. But the AAF spokesmen are not content to stop there and contend that large advertising expenditures are justified by the "fact" that they inform the public about new products, that advertising is the least

expensive way of getting such information to the consumer, and that the consumer can buy more efficiently when he compares advertisements for competing products. The fallacious nature of the claims about informing consumers can be shown in the utter lack of definitive information about such products as over-the-counter pain killers that advertising provides. If the consumer pays close attention to ads for Bayer and Tylenol, for example, he will "learn" only that the two manufacturers make conflicting claims that cannot, if interpreted literally, be simultaneously true. As for advertising's being the least expensive means of informing consumers about new products, this claim might be an example of begging the question if we concentrate on the concept of "informing." But admitting that a manufacturer is entitled to inform consumers about the existence of new products, we may wonder why there is not information about the relative costs of alternate means of informing consumers.

Question number three asks, "Doesn't advertising add to the cost of goods advertised?" The AAF admits that "marketing expense . . . must be included in the sales price." But there follows an explanation that advertising increases sales and that increased sales enable the manufacturer to lower unit costs and to lower prices. It is undeniable that mass production has seemed to lower the prices of such things as television sets, transistor radios, and calculators, but we may wonder whether competition from foreign manufacturers hasn't been a more significant factor. It would no doubt be difficult

for a consumer to cite lowered prices on widely-advertised goods like cigarettes, breakfast foods, and liquor, nor can inflation be the sole cause of unreduced prices on such goods. In fact, the brand-name mania of advertisers appears to have the opposite effect. We need only remember the comparison of prices for aspirin. And Jeffrey Schrank claims that heavily-advertised brand-name products can sell for 50 to 200 percent more than identical products that are not advertised.

Another question concerns advertising costs per unit of sale, and the answer cites less than half a cent on a pack of cigarettes and one-fifth of a cent per bottle of soft drink. Again, however, the AAF is not content to settle for an answer that might be unquestioningly accepted by consumers and continues by comparing such small advertising costs to retail selling costs of 15% to 18%. The failure to specify the exact nature of selling costs (do they include packaging? shipping? retail mark-up?) suggests that an itemized list of percentage of costs of each part of the marketing process might prove that advertising costs are not so small as they might appear. We have already seen Schrank's estimate of increased cost for brand names, and Sidney Margolius, in The Innocent Consumer Vs. the Exploiters (Pocket Books, 1968), cites figures that cast further doubt on the AAF's claims: he notes advertising and promotion costs of cereal at 20¢ per $1 as compared to a cost of only 21¢ per $1 for ingredients.

The pamphlet continues with further questions about and justifications of expenditures for advertising that promulgate

the myth that advertising ultimately cuts costs through increased production and volume of sales. There is also the hint that unadvertised products have something to hide: "Usually, the claim [to pass advertising savings on to the consumer] covers up an attempt to sell lower quality goods at a higher profit. . . ." But counter-arguments are as numerous as the AAF variations on the question. One very visible bit of evidence is store brands of groceries. These brands are often identical to nationally-advertised brands (coming from the same processing plants) and are invariably less expensive. Recently some grocery stores have been selling generic label staples such as canned vegetables, catsup, flour, and aluminum foil with some success. A check of prices at one such store revealed that a 16½-oz. can of cream-style corn was 37¢ for a national brand, 31¢ for a local brand, and 25¢ for a "no-name" brand. It is true that generic food products usually carry a lower Department of Agriculture grade designation, but grades are based on color, taste, and uniformity and have little or no bearing on nutritional value. Store brands of other items besides groceries exhibit similar savings. Although such chains as Sears and Montgomery Ward are constrained from revealing the manufacturers of their house-name products, a consumer can sometimes spot names on packaging, recognize design similarities, or find a salesman willing to reveal the secret. We must keep in mind that volume purchasing contributes to consumer savings here, but then we can wonder why huge conglomerates that have reached maximum efficiency

in mass production do not lower prices. Is it becuase they are still passing along advertising costs that "allowed" them to reach that efficiency?

The pamphlet's answers to questions about truth and taste in advertising are no more satisfying than its answers about the economics of advertising. The AAF would have the consumer believe that, in spite of occasional lapses, advertisers are interested in an increasingly high standard of advertising and that they achieve those standards by self-regulation through industry codes. But no mention is made, as it was in an earlier edition of the pamphlet, of federal regulation and judgment, which have, in recent years, required corrective advertising for such products as STP and Listerine. And the codes that the pamphlet mentions as evidence of advertisers' eagerness to regulate themselves are certainly at least partially inspired by a desire to avoid unfavorable action by government agencies. Examples of changes to satisfy demands abound in the National Association of Broadcasters' code. After hearings before the FTC concerning advertising directed toward children, the NAB code was changed to include disclaimers about the nutritional value of cereals and to cut commercial time in children's programming. But in practice little changed: cereal disclaimers appear as parts of lyrics set to catchy tunes or are deemphasized by blatant adjectives like "delicious" and "sweet," and through shorter ads the number of commercials has decreased only slightly. It is, in part, such halfway measures that have caused the FTC to be considering regulations that

would ban all advertising directed to children under eight and severely limit advertising to older children.

If I have implied, thus far, that evaluating special-interest materials requires in-depth knowledge of the subject or a great deal of research to refute debatable issues, I have been misleading. It is possible, in the case of the AAF pamphlet, to rely entirely upon basic principles of logic and argument to identify fallacious reasoning. And this possibility suggests that it may not be necessary or even desirable to reject special-interest materials as unsuitable for the classroom. It may be, in fact, that there is no better source of examples of logical fallacies. Further analysis of the AAF pamphlet reveals it to be a casebook of such fallacies.

A clear example of a post hoc argument comes in the answer to the question of whether advertising has anything to do with the standard of living in the United States. The answer begins, "Nowhere else in the world is advertising used so effectively and so extensively as in the United States. Nowhere else is there so high a standard of living." And the further commentary does nothing to mitigate this first fallacious relationship of ideas when it suggests that advertising creates a demand for products which make "an enriched, rewarding, and more confortable life for us all." The term "standard of living" is subverted to the advertisers' purposes without a single bow to greater values or to current concern about vanishing resources or environmental issues.

An ad hominem argument is revealed in the answer to the

question of why some critics attack advertising. One reason suggested is ignorance: "some . . . do not understand the economic service that advertising performs in promoting the . . . goods and services that provide the life blood of our high standard of living." The only other reason allowed is subversion: " . . . by attacking advertising they are, knowingly and purposely, attempting to discredit our entire American business system." Interesting enough, the AAF has deleted, in the current edition of the pamphlet, a more blatant condemnation of these "discreditors" which appeared in an earlier edition. Perhaps they realized that it was too hasty a generalization to suggest that any such critic "wants some other form of government in our country."

Similar refusal to allow more than two possible alternatives is revealed in the AAF's answer, in the earlier edition, to the question of what would happen if all advertising were discontinued. The quite expected answer is that the media would grind to a halt or be prohibitively expensive and that people would lose jobs as sales decreased. In summary, the pamphlet points out, "Our economy is built around aggressive selling and advertising and would go to pieces without them." The possibility of other alternatives is at least admitted, if not explored, in the more recent edition, which predicts only radical alteration and not complete collapse of our economic system. But the implied false assumption is, of course, that any change could not be for the better.

An inconsistent and therefore illogical system of

classification is employed in the answer to the question of who benefits from advertising. The three groups cited are the consumer, the businessman, and "all of us who work for a living," the logical implication being, of course, that consumers and businessmen don't work for a living. And the full commentary on how workers are benefited makes use of a fallacious scare tactic: if there is advertising, there is mass production, and if there is mass production, there is employment. If there were no advertising, one is expected to conclude, many of us would lose our jobs.

I have by no means exhausted what can be said about the deceptive language of this small five-page pamphlet, nor do I claim that I have chosen a typical example of special-interest educational materials. And I do not intend to suggest that only special-interest materials should be examined for deceptive language or fallacious reasoning. But I hope that I have alerted teachers to the problems of using free materials and suggested an answer to my title question about the cost of such materials. If they are used advisedly, they can be a real bargain. If they are accepted as truth, they can be far too expensive.